



**The Evolution of National Social
Dialogue in Europe under the Single
Market, 1992-2006**

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Abstract

This paper examines the evolution of national social dialogue (bipartite wage bargaining) across European countries. Several commentators in the 1990s expected the dismantling of national social dialogue institutions. Following the liberalisation of markets, intensification of competition, and declining union power, bargaining structures were supposed to converge to the Anglo-Saxon model of decentralised bargaining. The paper seeks to gauge the plausibility of the 'decentralization thesis' using novel indicators of collective bargaining centralization across the EU15. It is shown that despite the changes in product markets, flexible working, and declining union density, a generalized decentralization of bargaining did not occur. Instead, in many European cases there is a counter-trend of centralization, which casts doubt to the decentralization thesis.

Keywords: Europe, Labour Markets, Liberalization, Single Market, Social Dialogue.

The Evolution of National Social Dialogue in Europe under the Single Market, 1992-2006

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1. Introduction

The progress of European economic integration and the internationalisation of employee management practices were expected to have far-reaching consequences on national social dialogue institutions across advanced capitalist countries. Social dialogue here refers to traditional bi-partite wage bargaining institutions between trade unions and employers associations. Responding to what is commonly perceived as the move from Fordism to the post-Fordist era, European firms sought to enhance their competitiveness by pushing for more labour flexibility. This ‘search for flexibility’ (Atkinson, 1984; Boyer, 1988; Deakin & Reed, 2000; Freeman, 2005; Marsden, 1995; Streeck, 1987) would involve –among other things– the breakdown of long-standing social dialogue institutions. However, the direction of change proved to be more nuanced and differentiated than initially anticipated. In this paper I examine the divergent trajectories of change in wage bargaining institutions in European countries.

The early 1990s marked a crucial turning point for the progress of European integration. On the road from the Single European Act of 1986 until the completion of the Single Market in 1992 the focus of rules harmonisation within the European Union shifted towards removing non-tariff barriers to trade in manufacturing and services sectors. The processes of liberalisation and rules-harmonization were expected to have a ‘domino effect’ on national social dialogue institutions leading to a generalised decentralisation of bargaining (Crouch, 2000; Dolvik, 2004; Wallerstein, 1998). Although the ‘convergence’ of wage bargaining arrangements was not a preoccupation of the EU-level negotiations for the Economic and

Monetary Union (Dyson & Featherstone, 1999:785), the expectation was based on several grounds. The opening up of these markets to competition was thought to have weakened the incentive for cost-standardisation from the part of the firms. The process of privatisation was expected to modernise the internal work organisation of the firms, introducing new and more flexible management practices, thus transforming bureaucratic organisations into competitive firms. Overall, the pressures from EU liberalisation and international diffusion of work flexibility were the implicit forces putting pressure for institutional convergence to the Liberal market model of decentralised industrial relations. Despite the above strong pressures, a uniform trend towards decentralised pay setting is not observed in Europe when looking in the period up to 1992 (Wallerstein, Golden, & Lange, 1997). Instead, the breakdown of wage bargaining occurred in some sectors, and is mostly observed within Anglo-Saxon countries (Brown & Walsh, 1991; Wallerstein, 1998).

At the backdrop of this academic debate this paper sets out to gauge the plausibility of the ‘decentralization thesis’ by examining collective bargaining developments across European countries since the early 1990s. It is shown that despite the completion of the Single Market, the increased introduction of flexible working systems and decline of union power, there is no generalised trend towards decentralization.

The structure of the paper is as follows; the next section presents some methodological considerations that inform this paper; the third section substantiates the trends of product markets liberalisation, flexibility in working time and pay systems, and union power decline that provided pressures to collective bargaining centralisation; the fourth section examines indices of collective bargaining centralization across EU15 countries since the 1990s and concludes that decentralization did not happen and instead, collective bargaining institutions

proved much more resilient than initially anticipated; and the final section summarises the findings and discusses limitations and avenues for further research.

2. Methodological Considerations

The main research question that the paper is trying to answer is: how has wage bargaining centralisation evolved across Europe in light of the pressures from liberalisation and flexibility? A seminal study on the plausibility of the ‘decentralisation thesis’ by Michael Wallerstein, Miriam Golden and Peter Lange (1997:396-7) concluded that ‘overall the data indicate that recent institutional change is less universal’ and that ‘a general process of decentralisation is not evident’. However, they qualified their argument, admitting that ‘wage setting may become much more decentralised...in the future. Our point is that such a change has not happened yet’ (Wallerstein, et al., 1997:398). The aim of this section is to partly replicate and partly extend this seminal study.

The differences between the Wallerstein *et al.* (1997) article and this paper are summarised as follows. First, Wallerstein *et al.* looked at a time period from 1950 until 1992, while this paper picks the thread from 1992 onwards. This will allow the analysis to inquire into Wallerstein *et al.* qualification that ‘decentralisation may happen in the future’. Second, Wallerstein *et al.* looked at a sample of eight Northern and Central European countries (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden). By contrast, this section looks at the whole range of EU15 countries, which were affected by the completion of the Single Market Programme since 1992. Third, Wallerstein *et al.* took for granted the hypothesised changes in product markets and work organisation/payment systems. Instead, this section provides empirical evidence from novel OECD indicators and European survey data that these changes have indeed taken place. Finally, Wallerstein *et al.*

used various proxies of wage bargaining centralisation (interconfederal concentration, statutory authority, collective bargaining coverage) to measure the centralisation level and gauge the plausibility of the ‘decentralisation thesis’. The paper presents a novel composite indicator on wage bargaining centralisation developed by Jelle Visser and available from the ICTWSS database. The use of this composite indicator is superior to the previous proxies, because it was developed to capture precisely the phenomenon under study and thereby has increased validity (cf. footnote 3).

The next sub-section starts by examining the trends towards liberalisation of product markets across EU15, before gauging the extent of diffusion of flexible working practices. Finally, the section presents the trends of wage bargaining centralisation across Europe using novel indicators. It shows that a generalised decentralisation has not still happened. Instead, divergent trajectories of change are observed across Europe.

3. The Pressures towards Decentralization of Bargaining

3.1. Single Market and the Liberalisation of European Product Markets

As regarding product markets liberalisation¹ in Europe there was a decisive impact of the Single Market programme launched by the European Commission. The Single European Act of 1986 aimed at constructing a single market within the European Union and had a direct impact on the regulatory frameworks of national product markets, requiring the removal of protection from sectors and abolition of monopolies. Therefore ‘network industries’ such as transportation (railways, shipping, airlines), energy (electricity, gas), telecommunications, and financial services became part of the agenda of EU liberalisation (Begg & El-Agraa, 2004).

¹ The concept of liberalisation is preferred over the concept of deregulation. The single market indeed abolished restrictions, however, leading to a re-regulation of product markets, rather than complete ‘deregulation’; cf. Thatcher (2007:33,fn57).

The single market has brought about harmonisation of technical standards not only in products but also in production processes, which were largely seen as not-tariff barriers to trade (Young, 2005:109). On balance the completion of the internal market has led to substantial restructuring of industries facilitating greater competition in a wide range of sectors (Mercado, Welford, & Prescott, 2000:101). The product market regulation indicators developed by the OECD (Table below) reflect the impact of the Single market on member-states.

Table 1: Product Market Regulation across EU15, 1998 - 2008.

<i>Year</i>	<i>AT</i>	<i>BE</i>	<i>DK</i>	<i>FI</i>	<i>FR</i>	<i>DE</i>	<i>EL</i>	<i>IE</i>	<i>IT</i>	<i>LU</i>	<i>NL</i>	<i>PT</i>	<i>ES</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>UK</i>
1998	2.33	2.17	1.59	2.08	2.52	2.06	2.99	1.65	2.59	..	1.66	2.25	2.55	1.93	1.07
2003	1.76	1.59	1.18	1.30	1.75	1.60	2.58	1.35	1.81	1.48	1.36	1.64	1.68	1.49	0.82
2008	1.45	1.43	1.06	1.19	1.45	1.33	2.37	0.92	1.38	1.56	0.97	1.43	1.03	1.30	0.84
<i>Source: Wölf et al. (2009).</i>															

In almost all European countries – with the exception of Luxembourg – there is a downward trend in product market regulation. However, the extent of liberalisation varies from one country to another. By 2008 the LMEs of United Kingdom and Ireland are the member-states with the least economy-wide product market regulation. By contrast, Greece reduced the regulation of product markets compared to late 1990s, but by the end of the 2000s still remained one of the most regulated in Europe.

3.2. The Internationalisation of Flexible Working Practices and their Diffusion in Europe

The internationalisation of ‘best management practices’ and their diffusion across Europe has been the outcome of best practice benchmarking and more generally mimetic modelling. Ronald Dore (2002:117) insists that the diffusion of best practice methods and principles can be partly attributed to these processes. While the term ‘globalisation’ has been a popular

buzzword to describe this process, the thesis takes internationalisation as a more appropriate term. Indeed, research suggests that ‘global’ practices are usually transformed considerably when they are introduced into domestic economies (Ferner, Almond, & Colling, 2005). Hence, the weak development of globally oriented firms is consistent with a continuing internationalising economy, but much less so with a rapidly globalising economy (Rees & Edwards, 2011:19-21). This line of argument concurs with other scholars who criticised the strong ‘globalisation’ thesis (see also Thatcher, 2007:34).

Flexible working practices entail a range of different types of flexibility: (i) functional flexibility, (ii) numerical flexibility; (iii) temporal or working time flexibility and (iv) financial or pay flexibility (Casey, Keep, & Mayhew, 1999:71; Procter & Ackroyd, 2009:497-8; Treu, 1992). Functional flexibility denotes a qualitative adjustability in work organisation such as team-work and task rotation between employees with polyvalent skills, who may carry out different tasks in responses to fluctuations in demand. Unfortunately, the extent to which these practices have surfaced in European manufacturing and services sectors is difficult to measure.

However, there is evidence that the other three types of flexibility have been on the ascendance in Europe. Forms of numerical flexibility (such as fixed-term contracts, part-time work, and temporary/agency work) have been increased in Europe during the 1990s (Brewster, Mayne, & Tregaskis, 1997; Tregaskis & Brewster, 2006:121). Additionally, working time flexibility (e.g. flexitime) and pay flexibility (e.g. performance-related pay systems or PRP) have been increasingly used by European firms. Regrettably, there are no longitudinal data on the magnitude of change since the 1990s. Instead, a survey from the European Foundation for Working and Living Conditions provides compelling evidence on

how widespread they are in Europe (see tables below). The data refer to companies with 10 or more employees. This sampling does not pose a problem for this research context, because workplaces with less than 10 employees are likely to be outside the remit of wage bargaining agreements anyway.

Table 2. Percentage of Companies (%) with Flexi-time across EU15, 2009.

<i>Chapter 1</i>	AT	BE	DE	DK	EL	ES	FI	FR	IE	IT	LU	NL	PT	SE	UK
Industry	48.8	46.5	51.3	68.4	38.4	52.8	78	46.9	49.5	38.7	48.3	55.3	42.9	60.3	64.6
Services	54.7	55.8	61	69.7	33	56.9	84.8	52	63.1	56.6	61.5	59.6	50.9	68.7	71.1
All	53.1	53.8	58.5	69.4	34.3	55.6	82.8	50.8	60.6	48.8	58	58.7	48.1	67	70.1
<i>Source: European Foundation (2009).</i>															

Indeed, flexitime practices are widespread across Europe, with Greek companies having the lowest percentage of companies (34 per cent) and Finish companies having the highest percentage (83 per cent). In twelve out of fifteen European countries, the majority of companies over 10 employees use flexitime arrangements. Interestingly, there are no significant differences between services and manufacturing sectors.

Table 3. Percentage of Companies (%) with Employees Receiving Performance related Pay across EU15, 2009.

	AT	BE	DE	DK	EL	ES	FI	FR	IE	IT	LU	NL	PT	SE	UK
Individual Performance Related Pay Systems															
Industry	85.7	84	89.5	85.8	93.8	95.7	79.5	86.3	89	94.7	95.9	88.8	92.6	67.6	81.1
Services	86.5	88.5	92.3	87.5	92.7	90.6	81.7	94.1	92.6	91.2	94.2	94	89.8	73	86.5
All	86.3	87.6	91.6	87.1	93	92.1	81	92.2	92.1	92.6	94.6	93	90.6	71.4	85.6
Group Performance Related Pay Systems															
Industry	44.4	59.9	43	49.6	34.9	50.3	64.2	54.2	61.9	47.2	34.9	45.9	51.5	54.6	66
Services	47.8	67.2	41.5	53	29.5	62.4	59.4	59.3	59.7	43.2	26.8	60.6	63.1	51.3	56.5
All	47	65.8	41.9	52.2	30.6	58.8	60.8	58.1	60	44.8	28.7	57.8	59.5	52.3	58.1
<i>Source: European Foundation (2009).</i>															

Similarly, the table above provides evidence for the widespread application of performance related pay systems in both services and manufacturing sectors. The percentage of firms

utilising individual-based performance related pay ranges from 71 per cent in Sweden to almost 95 per cent in Luxembourg. Similarly, there are very high percentages of firms using group-based performance related pay systems ranging from 30 per cent in Greece to 66 per cent in Belgium.

3.3. The Decline of Trade Union Membership in Europe

The expectation for a generalised breakdown of centralised bargaining was also associated with a generalised trend of decline in union membership across advanced industrial countries (Katz, 1993). Indeed the decline has taken place not only in Anglo-Saxon countries, but also across Europe. The next table substantiates this constant decline in union density² across EU15 since the 1990s.

Table 4. Union Density Rates across EU15, 1990 - 2006.

Chapter 2	Year	AT	BE	DK	EL	ES	FI	FR	DE	IE	IT	LU	NL	PT	SE	UK
	1990	40.5	53.9	75.3	37.5	12.5	72.5	10.1	31.2	56.7	38.8	47.3	24.3	31.7	81.5	39.3
	1991	40.2	54.3	75.8	37.0	14.7	75.4	9.9	36.0	56.9	38.7	46.5	24.1	30.0	82.8	38.5
	1992	39.6	54.3	75.8	36.5	16.5	78.4	9.9	33.9	57.0	38.9	45.7	24.8	29.0	85.0	37.2
	1993	37.6	54.3	77.3	36.3	18.0	80.7	9.6	31.8	55.6	39.2	44.6	25.3	28.0	87.1	36.1
	1994	35.0	53.8	77.5	35.0	17.6	80.3	9.2	30.4	54.0	38.7	44.0	25.6	27.0	87.4	34.2
	1995	32.7	55.7	77.0	33.6	16.3	80.4	9.0	29.2	52.3	38.1	43.4	25.2	25.4	86.6	32.6
	1996	31.1	54.7	77.4	32.0	16.1	80.4	8.3	27.8	49.1	37.4	42.8	24.9	25.0	85.1	31.7
	1997	30.3	54.6	75.6	31.0	15.7	79.5	8.2	27.0	49.1	36.2	42.3	24.4	24.3	82.0	31.0
	1998	28.1	53.7	75.5	29.2	16.4	78.0	8.0	25.9	45.5	35.7	43.6	23.8	23.0	82.3	30.1
	1999	25.7	51.8	74.9	29.0	16.2	76.3	8.1	25.3	42.6	35.4	43.5	23.5	22.0	81.6	29.8
	2000	24.7	50.5	74.2	28.0	16.9	75.0	8.2	24.6	40.8	34.7	43.4	23.1	21.0	80.1	29.7
	2001	24.5	50.8	73.8	27.0	16.1	74.5	8.1	23.7	39.7	34.2	43.3	22.6	20.0	78.0	29.3
	2002	23.1	51.9	81.4	26.0	16.4	73.5	8.2	23.5	39.8	33.6	43.2	22.4	18.9	77.7	29.2
	2003	23.0	52.9	72.4	26.3	16.4	72.9	8.4	23.0	39.5	33.5	43.1	22.5	16.6	77.2	29.3
	2004	22.7	52.9	71.7	25.0	16.0	74.1	8.4	22.1	38.1	34.0	43.0	22.4	17.0	78.0	28.8
	2005	22.4	52.5	71.8	23.1	15.5	73.3	8.5	21.6	35.9	34.4	43.0	22.3	17.0	76.5	29.0
	2006	20.3	..	69.4	23.0	15.1	72.4	8.5	20.9	..	34.8	..	21.8	17.0	75.3	28.4
<i>Source: Visser (2007).</i>																

² Union density is the conventional indicator of the strength of union membership. It is derived as follows: actual members in trade unions divided by the potential members (i.e. total of employed wage earners).

Overall, the evidence suggests that in fourteen out of fifteen European countries, union density has been in constant decline since the 1990s. Only Spain managed to increase union members by a few percentage points between 1990 and 2006. Still, Spain and France share the lowest union densities in Europe, standing at 15 per cent and 8.5 per cent respectively. The countries that recorded the greatest losses (ranging from 10.4 per cent to 20.8 per cent) are Greece, Portugal, Austria, Germany, the United Kingdom and Ireland.

4. Divergent Trajectories of Change in Wage Bargaining Centralisation

The above-sketched picture of generalised decline in union density is not matched by a generalised breakdown of centralised wage bargaining. Despite the liberalisation of markets across Europe and the introduction of flexible working practices, which were documented in the previous sections, the evidence below suggest that wage bargaining centralisation held well, even if it took divergent trajectories of change. Taking advantage of a newly constructed indicator³ from the ICTWSS database, we are able to gauge the trends in wage bargaining centralisation across EU15 countries since 1992. The evidence against the ‘decentralisation thesis’ is overwhelming; there is no generalised trend towards breakdown of centralised bargaining across Europe. This confirms the earlier finding of Wallerstein et al. (1997:398) that there is little evidence to support this claim and that the expectation of decentralisation was not borne out (Ferner & Hyman, 1998). Instead, a picture of divergent trajectories emerges, with some countries experiencing decentralisation and some others centralisation, while most are somewhere in the middle with stability in the centralisation of bargaining.

³ According to Visser (2007) this indicator is a summary measure of centralisation of wage bargaining, which takes into account both union authority and union concentration at multiple levels. It is derived from Iversen’s centralisation index, taking values from 0 to 1. The formula is given by the equation: $\sqrt{[(\mathbf{Cauthority} * \mathbf{Hcf}) + (\mathbf{Affauthority} * \mathbf{Haff})]}$, where: **Cauthority**: authority of union confederation over its affiliates; **Hcf**: Membership concentration at central or confederal level (Herfindahl index at central level); **Affauthority**: authority of affiliate over their local or workplace branches and representatives; **Haff**: Membership concentration at the industry level, within union confederations (Herfindahl index at sectoral level).

Table 5. Wage Bargaining Centralisation across EU15, 1992 - 2006.

Year	AT	FR	PT	LU	UK	EL	SE	BE	DK	IT	NL	ES	IE	DE	FI
1992	0.523	0.269	0.391	0.419	0.299	0.462	0.519	0.512	0.425	0.375	0.583	0.376	0.451	0.438	0.396
1993	0.534	0.278	0.389	0.417	0.298	0.470	0.520	0.513	0.430	0.389	0.573	0.373	0.450	0.438	0.422
1994	0.441	0.287	0.385	0.412	0.296	0.463	0.521	0.514	0.430	0.389	0.563	0.373	0.450	0.438	0.420
1995	0.440	0.283	0.385	0.412	0.298	0.457	0.518	0.514	0.429	0.390	0.573	0.373	0.449	0.438	0.421
1996	0.414	0.273	0.385	0.408	0.301	0.457	0.516	0.514	0.429	0.388	0.593	0.373	0.505	0.436	0.465
1997	0.416	0.272	0.382	0.405	0.302	0.452	0.548	0.514	0.429	0.388	0.594	0.374	0.505	0.434	0.465
1998	0.424	0.268	0.382	0.415	0.299	0.449	0.546	0.514	0.429	0.388	0.643	0.375	0.504	0.502	0.459
1999	0.424	0.268	0.382	0.412	0.302	0.447	0.550	0.514	0.427	0.388	0.642	0.376	0.502	0.516	0.459
2000	0.424	0.267	0.377	0.412	0.302	0.447	0.541	0.514	0.427	0.388	0.643	0.367	0.502	0.518	0.460
2001	0.420	0.263	0.378	0.407	0.303	0.453	0.537	0.515	0.426	0.388	0.641	0.375	0.503	0.538	0.461
2002	0.420	0.265	0.379	0.407	0.303	0.458	0.534	0.528	0.426	0.389	0.640	0.417	0.503	0.528	0.460
2003	0.421	0.261	0.377	0.401	0.303	0.465	0.532	0.529	0.425	0.389	0.632	0.416	0.503	0.527	0.460
2004	0.421	0.257	0.377	0.407	0.302	0.465	0.531	0.529	0.421	0.389	0.632	0.418	0.503	0.501	0.472
2005	0.421	0.255	0.377	0.407	0.301	0.464	0.529	0.530	0.442	0.388	0.631	0.419	0.503	0.498	0.471
2006	0.421	0.252	0.377	n.a.	0.300	0.465	0.529	0.530	0.440	0.389	0.629	0.419	0.501	0.497	0.470
92-06 (Δ)	-0.102	-0.018	-0.014	-0.012	0.001	0.003	0.009	0.017	0.015	0.014	0.046	0.043	0.051	0.059	0.073
92-06 (%)	-19.55	-6.53	-3.64	-2.86	0.24	0.75	1.78	3.37	3.47	3.60	7.84	11.41	11.24	13.43	18.54
Trend	Decentralisation (< -3.5%)			Stability (± 3.5%)						Centralisation (> 3.5%)					

5. Concluding Remarks and Further Research

The core finding of this paper confirm the findings of studies examining an earlier period (Wallerstein, et al., 1997:398). Moreover, it suggests that since the completion of the Single Market in 1992, there is little evidence of a generalised trend towards decentralization of wage bargaining arrangements. Instead, there is tentative evidence to suggest that changes in collective bargaining institutions have been mixed including both convergent and divergent trends (Marginson & Sisson, 2002, 2006). However, there is evidence to suggest a more informal and subtle trend towards what has been termed as ‘organized decentralization’ (Ilsøe, 2012; Kornelakis, 2014; Traxler, 1995). In the more coordinated cases, those novel compromises have accommodated wage restraint under EMU (Herrmann, 2005; Johnston & Hancké, 2009) and hence explain part of the resilience of institutions. This tentative finding has some limitations that further research could explore. I briefly elaborate on those below.

First, the fact that there is no ‘generalised trend’ does not mean that decentralization has not taken place in individual countries or specific sectors within countries. The summary measure that we used here provided evidence against a generalised trend. The findings from this paper imply that the causal mechanism linking purported causes with the process of decentralization is flawed. Product market liberalisation, flexible time and pay practices, and union decline may be necessary but they are not sufficient conditions for the process of decentralization to be observed.

Second, existing indicators of wage bargaining centralization document, at best, incremental changes over time. Collective bargaining change (just like any sort of institutional change) is likely to be slow and path-dependent. This is partly warranted by the very small changes in the levels of centralization indicators. In fact, in many countries the indicator does not even vary from a given year to another. Additionally, while the wage bargaining summary measure is a useful tool, it is unable to capture more nuanced changes such as the ‘organized decentralization’ mentioned above. While this (informal) change may take place the indicator will be prone to identify institutional stability rather than change.

Third, shifting the unit of analysis from national-level to sub-national level is likely to yield valuable methodological advantages. Notably, it will hold constant a number of pertinent explanatory variables. King et al (1994) praise the merits of this approach and this is congruent with methodological choices in part of the literature dwelling on collective bargaining change. Pontusson & Swenson (1996) focused on the motives of the metalworking sector employers in abandoning the centralised bargaining system. Mueller & Purcell (1992) studied the changes in work organization within the automobile sector to

identify factors leading to decentralization. Thelen (2000) looked at the manufacturing industry to explain resilience of collective bargaining arrangements in Germany. Poulsen (2006) used the coal mining and steel industries to test hypotheses about collective bargaining decentralization. Similar sectoral case studies might yield useful insights.

Finally, the analysis did not take into account the re-emergence of social pacts in Europe (Avdagic, Rhodes, & Visser, 2011). Instead, the focus was on bi-partite social dialogue that takes the form of collective bargaining agreements. Hence, it leaves out the possibility that coordination could take the form of ad hoc tripartite social pacts at the national level. Those may involve not only employers and trade unions, but also the state and may be focused on wider set of economic and social policy issues, rather than the wages and working conditions that typically fall within the remit of collective bargaining agreements. Exploring further the dynamics of social dialogue structures is important, because they are a standard feature of the European Social Model (Hyman, 2005; Jepsen & Pascual, 2005; Scharpf, 2002). This line of research becomes even timelier in the context of the on-going economic recession.

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